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ABSTRACT

A combination of traditional reading, media, and Internet information sources is necessary in today's educational sphere to bridge cultural differences, engage students' realms of experience, and promote academic and cultural literacy. A key issue for educators today is to utilize and extend the vehicles students are currently using in order to enhance critical thinking skills. Students often come to basic writing classes as academic outsiders, literate in their neighborhoods, often technologically socialized, but lacking the literacy of higher learning. The kinds of literacy skills students must have to function in today's world include an understanding of intertextuality, a validation of many kinds of texts, and the ability to sort through positions on a topic. Discussion around contradictory visual images such as in advertisements can show how information affects response and how a range of sources is needed to draw reasonable conclusions. Students must be taught to evaluate the media sources they use in relationship to other printed information. (EF)

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CS 217 090

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Blending Cultural, Academic, and Technological Communication: Literacy for the New Millennium

This presentation will suggest methods to bridge communication differences to engage students and promote writing through blending traditional reading, Internet information, and Mass Media Offerings.

"If one is to use a language well, one must know the culture that uses the language" (153). These words from Communication Between Cultures are a reminder to teachers who work with ethnically diverse classes, that the task of communicating to a culturally mixed group of students is complex. An important question for English instructors to ask is "What will teaching English need to include to be an essential part of educating our students?" Communication style, mass media modes, and classroom curriculum need to be considered together if we are to give our students what they need in a language that is meaningful to them. This is even more important for students identified as basic writers since these students are often inexperienced with the writing conventions of the college classroom, and quite familiar with movies, television, magazines, video games and computer games. Through examining communication styles of community college students I have encountered, I have seen how they get their information, as well as their styles for accessing information and I want them to know how to examine what they know critically. A key issue for educators today is to utilize and extend the vehicles students are currently using to enhance critical thinking skills. For my students that means using current movies, Internet sites, as well as the traditional newspapers articles, essays and books typically found in the college classroom.

Miles Myers reminds us that as a society we are changing our focus from delivered information to translating information for problem solving. Collaboration is needed for survival and communication between cultural groups is part of that collaboration. Ways of talking and communicating are often ways of knowing. How do these basic human actions mesh with the new technological age and the college writing classroom? If our students who come from diverse racial and cultural backgrounds access information from internet sources and movies, don't we as educators need to incorporate these vehicles into our teaching, as we teach the reading and writing of the

academy? While I see computer labs at the various community colleges and universities where I teach, many of my colleagues are still reluctant to move beyond traditional books and essays in teaching writing. As a colleague of mine recently said to me, "If I try to teach writing with computer use, I wind up spending too much time teaching computer use." My colleague's reason for not using technology may not be typical, but his reluctance to extend his teaching methods to reach a more media oriented student body is not unusual. I have also had colleagues tell me "there is very little on the net that I can use in the classroom." When I hear comments that speak of fixed teaching methods, I feel bound to explain the potential in extending teaching to include current media sources.

As educators, many of us are not maximizing computer use in the classroom. I say this because the language of technology has crossed cultural boundaries. Many of today's students access and arrange information from computer sources. They also tend to read less and attend popular movies and watch television more than generations that preceded them. A June 22nd article in the Los Angeles Times titled "A Latino Internet Revolution" pointed out "Once separated from the American mainstream, Spanish-surnamed households are connecting to the Web at record rates and the rush is on to cater to this new market" (1). It appears that the commercial value of the Internet will eventually help promote access across ethnic and racial lines, making it as commonplace as the television. As educators, our job is to tap into this media use and teach the evaluative skills that will make the information sources truly useful in an academic setting.

Our students often come to basic writing classes as academic outsiders, literate in their neighborhoods, often technologically socialized, but lacking the literacy of higher learning. For these students, often marginalized by their financial status, the issue of access to technology has been a primary concern for instructors considering using technology. This issue is real and access is a two-part problem. Not only must students have computers available for their use, they must be comfortable and capable using them for classroom purposes. Though many community college students automatically receive the Internet as part of their student fees, they often don't have training to utilize the computers in an academic context. This means we must establish student patterns of

practice and familiarity in the classroom through the assignments we require. While it is true that access to technology is inconsistent, like the telephone and television in their early stages, the signs of fast growth are present. The simplified instruction manuals located next to the computers in the computer lab is one instructional step that needs to be followed up in the writing classroom with additional steps that include exploration and evaluation.

One way to teach evaluation is through advertising. Advertising, which appears both on the web and in print, often shows the mixture of cultural cues and implications we get from media sources. Recent ads for Gap clothing that are currently on the web are a prime example. What social message is conveyed by showing exceedingly thin young females models for adolescent clothing? What gender specific message is presented? What popular figures are the ads attempting to imitate? Are our young females equipped to understand that the thin portrayal they see is not a message for them to stop eating? Can they withstand the pressure to fit an unstated yet visually apparent standard? To understand the message of the ad requires an understanding of cultural cues. Why would underfed females be used to sell clothing and why would this be a successful campaign.

The contradictions (health versus fashion) that appear in visual images such as ads for products invite interpretations and demand the viewer participate in the process of making meaning, drawing on a particular frame of reference to construct meaning. As educators, we need to equip our students to interpret the visual images they encounter on television, magazines, in movies, or on the web. Ads like the Gap ad need to be discussed and interpreted. I walk my students through this process by first having them view an ad. Next, they must write down what the ad made them think of. We put the different interpretations on the board and discuss the reasons why those ideas were generated. From this type of discussion students can begin to see how one picture can produce a myriad of responses depending on the background information a viewer brings to an ad. This type of discussion can show how information affects response and how a range of sources is needed to draw reasonable conclusions.

We also need to show our students competing perspectives. While anorexic looking females might appeal to one segment of the market, we should also show evidence of ads appealing to athletic, professional, and academic types. Instructors need

to give students the cultural awareness to identify perspectives that belong to a school of thought. An informed user of technology needs a wide context to be able to evaluate the images and information presented. So, while the words on our screens are becoming briefer, we need increasingly more background information to put the visual images into a meaningful context.

Another way to show difference in context is to show how a similar theme is handled by different communication modes. I show students a film representation not as an isolated event but as one text in a larger conversation. To accomplish this I introduce some of those other texts into the classroom. In my summer English 1 writing class, I used the film Joy Luck Club, an essay by Jessica Hagedorn, critiquing the movie, and the People Magazine website to illustrate different presentations of gender issues. The Joy Luck Club presents a story of Asian women adapting to a new culture while maintaining age-old cultural values. Hagedorn's essay points out that the movie reinforces old stereotypes of the powerlessness of Asian and Asian American women. The People Magazine website in comparison, shows numerous pictures of Hollywood's version of beauty and what has come to be American's stereotypical thin, long haired, perfect skinned woman. Even though the subject matter of the presentations is similar, each mode presents a slightly different interpretation of women. When these sources are discussed, an instructor can point out that the presentation of women is assigned by culture. If our students are gathering ideas from movies, magazines, websites and books, it is important to show how a similar idea is presented in each of these modes. Those who access a particular mode exclusively are most likely to be influenced by the presentation. The kinds of literacy skills students must have to function in today's world include an understanding of intertextuality, a validation of many kinds of texts, and the ability to sort through positions on a topic.

Movies can be a valuable tool in identifying perspectives even for those of us who consider ourselves avid readers. As a middle-aged adult, my understanding of the white supremacist movement in American was based on newspaper articles and the background information I gained while studying World War II. After watching the movie American History X, I added the perspective this movie conveyed to my frame of reference. I find myself thinking of this movie when I read stories of hate crimes in the news. Whether

this is a complete way to gather information or not, it can be recognized as part of the way our society transmits ideas, or as Miles Myers reminds us it is another way of knowing. This reality is important to consider from both the instructor's frame of reference as well as the student's. Our students are meeting their information needs in many ways that don't include traditional textbooks, yet they still need direction to broaden their understanding of what they are learning.

This past semester, I incorporated a video component to my developmental English literature class. Since the focus of the class is ethnic literature, my students had to select eight movies from a list of movies that present various stories of race, ethnicity and culture. The movies, which typically reflect current cultural expressions, offer students the opportunity to identify common stereotypes. Often students don't realize that stereotypes are dictated by culture and tend to perpetuate inaccurate perspectives. Important cultural awareness can be learned through a combination of popular films and ethnic literature. The essay "Lullaby" by Leslie Marmon Silko, which describes an American Indian woman as she confronts government authority, is a stark contrast to the Indians shown attacking settlers in westerns of the fifties and sixties. To add to student perspective, I also had them research websites by typing in various Native American entry words to compare the information the Internet provides.

It is important that students learn to evaluate web information since so much information continues to be added to the Internet. Few work environments are without computers. Fred Kemp asserts that new technology simply is the way people are writing and will write. Yet, as glitzy and exciting as it is to be able to access web sites and grab bits of information from around the world, both the readers and writers of web information need to understand the concept of context that is applied to any given piece of information. This past semester I explained the importance of evaluating reference sites on the Web and gave my students the web address for Proctor and Gamble as well as the web address for the Food and Drug Administration. I instructed students to research the product Olestra using both sites to get information. The information from Proctor and Gamble, not surprisingly, was very positive in regards to their product. In contrast the Food and Drug Administration offered a number of negative considerations. While this small comparison may not seem significant to an experienced reader, it is a

graphic illustration of how different perspectives can be presented and distorted. As instructors, we need to provide this type of experience to our students so they realize the value of comparing and analyzing sources they seek for information. In this example, the Internet does not replace traditional reading. Rather, the use of the Internet alongside of traditional sources can enhance the value of the lesson. The websites provided immediate visual reinforcement for the concept of distortion in presentation that we need to discuss.

Comparing and analyzing are traditional tools of the college English classroom. This fall my Developmental English students are reading the novel Montana 1948. The novel deals with issues of racism, family dysfunction, and personal growth. All of these issues are familiar to my students. When we discuss this novel and make connections to current newspaper articles, multicultural essays, and movies, they can more readily see how literature, movies and newspapers are expressions of their life experience. Movies are not just entertainment and reading is not just homework because the interconnectedness has been established.

We have numerous examples to select from to convey the idea of perspective. The important concept to plant is the variety of ways to look at any one issue and the importance of evaluating those perspectives. Lester Faigley says, "Finding information on the World Wide Web has been compared to drinking from a fire hose"(134). The quantity is overwhelming even to experienced researchers. The elaborate classification systems of libraries give many clues about the origin and reliability of information. Many websites purport to offer factual, neutral information, but in fact are highly biased. There are pages that deny the Holocaust with seemingly creditable references. Instructors today must identify search engines, and category clues so students have a path to follow that offers reliability indicators and narrowing opportunity as they make their cyber selections.

It is important to remember that as useful as technology is becoming, the written mode is not being replaced by the visual; both modes are utilized for specialized tasks. The textbooks of today exemplify this development in their greater emphasis on diagrams and pictures with writing to explain. There is a growing awareness that some communication is done best through writing while other information is better understood through pictures. I recently bought a book entitled Teach Yourself Office 2000 Visually.

This book relies primarily on pictures to teach computer use. Words are used under the diagrams to explain in greater detail. Both writing and images are informative but they are not informative in the same way or about the same things.

Gunther Kress says, "Information which displays what the world is like is carried by the image; information which orients the reader in relation to that information is carried by language. The functional load of each mode is different"(76). The idea of how words and images are being utilized together in today's communication reinforces Miles Myers and his theory of today's literacy. I mentioned Myers earlier when I used his words, "Ways of talking are ways of knowing" (296). He speaks of recognizing different ways of organizing our experience. We know that movies and television are both ways of organizing our experience. Utilizing computers and the information they provide is also becoming a more common way of organizing our experience. If we are to reach today's students it is up to instructors to tap in to student experience. If the academic environment is to be meaningful, it must work to bring understanding to our everyday world. Movies create impressions of how we live. The broad reach the computer offers reflects a myriad of international ideas. Our students are accessing information from a range of sources. We must teach them to evaluate the media sources they use in relationship to other printed information. We want students to act on what they know rather than merely respond to what they don't understand.

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